"…And that means I can do anything": The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time and the changing definition of "disability"

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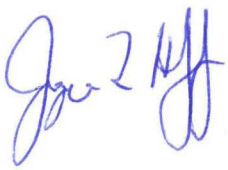

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Abstract

Disability is something that affects every single person in this world, regardless of whether the larger society realizes it or not. Unless each individual is proactively attempting to do so, the walls of stereotype that have been built around those with disabilities will not be torn down. I approach the prejudices facing people with disabilities from a literature standpoint by examining Mark Haddon's 2003 novel The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time. Haddon's novel is a first as far as disability in literature is concerned, because it not only features a disabled narrator, but this narrator also breaks out of the mold of the stock disabled character. I argue that Christopher, the narrator, is meant to educate the reader about the realities of living with a disability, specifically autism, and to demonstrate that disability is not wrong: its just different. I examine the symptoms and traits of autism and compare them to those of Christopher to prove the realistic nature of Haddon's depiction of the disorder, followed by a close reading of the novel examining Christopher as a character, the way the people around him react to him, and how the world would be if Christopher - or someone who thought like him - were able to run it. Finally, I conclude by stating that the only thing holding Christopher back from doing "anything" are the preconceived ideas of those around him, and the limits placed on him not by his disability but by society itself.

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Introduction

And I know this because I went to London on my own, and because I solved the mystery of Who Killed Wellington? and I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything.

-Christopher, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, pg. 268

It is with these words that British author Mark Haddon chooses to end The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time. Protagonist Christopher has finished telling us, the readers, the story of how he found a dead dog in his neighbor's front lawn and how his detective skills led him on a great adventure in which he not only discovered the murderer of the dog, but also uncovered important things about his own past. The statement with which Christopher ends the novel, an assertion of his own abilities, can put the reader in an odd position, for they have witnessed Christopher's actions throughout the course of the novel, and one has to wonder if he is truly capable of doing *anything*. The fact that a disabled character is making this statement is also wholly unique for a society in which people are used to seeing those who live with a disability as merely sympathy invoking, and possibly incapable of accomplishing their dreams or contributing to society.

These sentences are also an interesting way to end a book because they leave the reader questioning the unfinished plot. When first encountered, this ending can seem flawed, or even incomplete. The *New York Times* book review calls the tidiness of the ending "an illusion, as the gulf between Christopher and his parents, between Christopher and the rest of us, remains immense and mysterious" (McInerney). This is no neat, well-packaged ending, and many questions remain unanswered. We discover the answer to the mysterious incident mentioned in

the title of the novel, by the end of the novel the reader realizes that this story is not a mystery about a dog at all, but a mystery about Christopher's past. The true focus of the book is not Wellington the dog, but the protagonist, and the way he interacts with and is viewed by the world around him.

Haddon's debut novel for adults features Christopher, a character who is disabled but not defined by his disability, and who is an example of an author breaking down the walls of prejudice. Christopher has his own personality outside of being a plot or sympathy device, is a true account of the struggles and victories of a disabled boy, and is, most importantly, a figure of what could and *should* be the future of disability in literature.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time was a first in literature as far as narration and first-person voice. Many people, such as book blogger Rebecca Schinsky, considered the novel to be something entirely unique and new. Schinsky writes, "Christopher narrates his story in a voice unlike any I've read in contemporary literature. He is sufficiently detached from his thoughts and emotions to examine them and think about them logically, and he understands that he is different" (Schinsky). I have a personal interest in this book because my mother is a case manager for people with mental and physical disabilities. Throughout my life, I have come into contact with people with autism several times, and I think it is a disability of which the public should be made more aware. The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time paints a perfect picture for the reader of what autism looks like in the character of Christopher. Besides being a novel concerned with disability studies, it is also considered a well-written piece of literature and had a good showing on several bestseller lists.

Individual book critics had raving reviews about the debut novel, and many of these reviewers seemed to grasp the major ideas the novel was putting forth. The *New York Times*, for

one, had an extremely positive reflection on the novel. Beginning the article by discussing the novel's original mystery intent, journalist Jay McInerney seems to have a firm grasp on what exactly Haddon wished a reader to walk away with from his novel. McInerney discusses the fact that The Curious Incident… is more than an imitation of literature, because it forces the reader to think about things in a different way than they had before picking up the novel. The reader is able to think about his or her own conception of what disability is, and how exactly he or she defines it. This sense of interactivity that comes along with the text is extremely important, for if the stereotype of disability is to be altered in literature, it will have to be through the individual readers rather than the reimagining of an entire genre.

But, in terms of enlightening novels, The Curious Incident... is hardly mentioned, if ever. Its popularity is certainly not on-par with inspirational tear-jerkers as Flowers for Algernon or One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest, where the plight of the main character makes the reader thankful for the life he or she is living and content simply to read these strenuous tales from the page. Christopher's story is a difficult one, to be sure, but why is it not considered to be a great classic of modern literature, or at least read in literature classes outside of those concerning disability studies? The aforementioned novels play into the stereotypes of disability, and, while this is a main theme in Haddon's tale, the disability does not stick to the guidelines in literature that casual readers are used to encountering. This has the tendency to make a reader uncomfortable, for he or she finds a character within the novel that is entirely disconcerting, and the character's disability separates his or her from the reader more than any distance ever could.

Disability is often represented in a stereotypical way that encourages the prejudgments already facing those with disabilities. Although it is not one of the more well known ones, there is certainly a prejudice towards the mentally and physically disabled in today's world. People

tend to know next to nothing about disability, and, as evidenced in the novel, often are unsure of how to react when confronted by it. "We must come to see that these people we call 'disabled' are also people with abilities, individuals who have important contributions to make in our society, but who face obstacles all of us have unwittingly set in their paths" (Bowe vii). Many of the obstacles that these individuals face are not their own, but ones that are put upon them by peers or observers. Thomson uses a few examples to illustrate this point, stating that wheelchair users only find themselves impaired when faced with stairs, while a deaf individual's condition would not be 'disabling' if those around them knew how to sign (7).

This tendency to discriminate is extremely prevalent within the world of literature, where disability has become something of a plot device, and characters are often defined only by their disability, and not the sort of person they are. These stereotypes about the disabled are inaccurate, but they occur as 'stock" characters, used to invoke an emotion within the reader. These stock characters can be viewed as a hero for overcoming their disability, or a bitter person, jealous of the people in the world who are "normal", or maybe even just 'simple', devoid of any personality whatsoever and controlled completely by an addled mind. A perfect example of this is the character Lennie in Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men. When reading a character analysis of him from Sparknotes.com, it is noted right from the start, in the second sentence, that Lennie has a mental disability. He is referred to throughout the analysis as 'simple', 'lumbering', and naive. These characteristics describe the disability of the man, not the man with a disability. Lennie's disability leads to the central conflict and a turning point within the novel, and, after his disposal, the other characters within the novel state that his death was necessary.

Here we have a man who does not develop within the novel, and is used within the novel as a point of sympathy for readers. He serves to move the plot along and to make the other

characters make their own self-actualizations, not to make the reader question his or her own idea of disability or to do any character growing of his own. In The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime, Christopher is a foil to this sort of a character. Vivid, bright, and wholly unique, this protagonist is anything but a plot device, for he seems to make his own plot of the world around him. He is not meant to inspire sympathy, but simply to be, a character with a disability that lives out every day with his autism/Asperger's and who is wholly aware of how his disability affects him.

That being said, Haddon makes no effort to disguise the difficulty that comes along with living with autism. Christopher's symptoms are realistic and his stream-of-consciousness narrative voice, while difficult to decipher at times, gives a view right into his own mind. There is no sugarcoating on this character to make the reader feel a bit more optimism for the plight of 'poor, disabled Christopher'. The simple facts are laid out before every individual who reads this book: Christopher has autism, or an extremely severe case of Asperger's. This is an extremely serious disability and there will be no beating around the bush about the situation. People with autism are not learning to 'overcome' their disability, as is so often seen in stock disabled characters, but are simply living with it. Christopher does not become magically cured by the end of the book, nor will he ever become 'normal', in society's sense of the word. Haddon's novel advocates for society to accept those who live their life differently, as Christopher does, and, as is evident within the novel, he wants the reader to know that people like his narrator exist in the world. This is real life disability.

It is in the final sentences of the book where Haddon really aims to drive his point home. The issues that Christopher struggles with throughout the novel are substantial, to be sure, but that should not cause a reader to have any preconceived notions about the boy or his condition.

By stating that Chris "can do anything", Haddon is trying to explain this point to the reader throughout his novel: being 'disabled' is not wrong, it's just different from what many people encounter on a daily basis. By making Christopher a true personality who is living through his disability, the reader is able to see Haddon's ideas at work.

Readers of this novel can feel many ways about it, and Christopher is usually appreciated and tolerated more by those who have experience with or a general knowledge of autism. There are those who pick up the book because they had heard it was a good mystery read, and they reach the final page feeling wholly disappointed. Christopher is, to put it plainly, a difficult narrator and protagonist. What kind of a reason could possibly exist for any author to create this character? Why would Mark Haddon choose to make his debut novel one that, while it has the potential to move and affect people, also has the same potential to confuse and disgust the same readers? Several online reviews claim to dislike Christopher, calling him selfish, rude, emotionless, and simply 'not a very good person'. These anonymous reviewers claimed that Christopher had no redeeming qualities, that his frequent outbursts and monotonous narrative voice left them cold towards him, and this profoundly affected their feelings about the novel.

Christopher could have been written as another famous 'disabled' person, Tiny Tim in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, optimistically existing to prove to Scrooge that the world has things worth appreciating, and this might have made these reviewers feel more comfortable. Christopher could have been written in a similar fashion as the 'cripple' Laura in Tennessee Williams' "The Glass Menagerie", losing hope by the second that he will ever be able to live a life outside of his condition, and this might have made reviewers have more pity for him. But these would not be true accounts of the disability that Christopher lives with on a day-to-day basis, but rather the sugarcoated stories of disability that many people are used to and find

comforting. Dickens may have been realistic in his time while depicting Tiny Tim, but, in our day and age, stereotypes like these simply cannot be tolerated any longer. Mark Haddon chose to go outside of this comfort zone with his novel and Christopher, making a statement rather than staying inside of the box of disability. In his novel, author Mark Haddon creates a character in Christopher that is able to redefine the prejudice that is often associated with the "disabled" in literature, for better or for worse.

Autism/Asperger's

Before a reader can understand anything about the novel or the character that is Christopher John Francis Boone, he or she must first understand his disability. According to the DSM-IV, autism and Asperger's are both classified as developmental disorders, their symptoms recognizable in early childhood. "Asperger's is classified as an autism spectrum disorder, the two sharing traits but individuals with Asperger's usually do not live with the language barriers in early childhood as much as those with autism do" (DSM-IV Criteria). It is for this reason that readers and critics of The Curious Incident... tend to "diagnose" Christopher with Asperger's rather than autism. Although the reader has no knowledge of Christopher's history or early years beyond the few we see in the book, given the traits Christopher shows throughout the novel, this is a reasonable diagnosis for a non-medically trained reader to make.

It is important to note here that Haddon himself has never classified Christopher as having either one of these disabilities, and has been purposefully ambiguous when asked about Christopher's clinical diagnosis, stating in interviews that he merely has a disability and it affects his behavior. This is mainly to keep Christopher's disability ambiguous and relatable, but also

because Haddon never meant for the character to be specifically diagnosed with Asperger's or autism. On his personal website, he states:

> Labels say nothing about a person. They only say how the rest of us categorize that person. Good literature is always about peeling labels off. And treating people with dignity is always about peeling the labels off. A diagnosis may lead to practical help, but genuinely understanding another human being involves talking and listening to them and finding out what makes them an individual, not what makes them part of a group. (*Mark Haddon*)

This quote is important because it shows that the 'disability' that Christopher has, or the way he is treated, is no different from the way other outsiders are treated. The reader is meant to read Christopher's story and discover more about him than any stereotype could have to offer.

On that note, one of the most effective ways to learn about these disorders is from first-hand experience: the mouths of the people themselves. People diagnosed with autism and Asperger's have the potential to become extremely successful in their lives, just like any person without a disability has the same. Heather Kuzmich, a former contestant on the top reality TV show *America's Next Top Model*, was diagnosed with Asperger's as a child, and has become a champion for the cause, stating that "she hopes to continue modeling and eventually become a national spokeswoman for Asperger's" (Parker-Pope). John Elder Robison, the elder brother of memoirist Augusten Burroughs, is the author of the 2007 memoir Look Me in the Eye, detailing his life living with Asperger's syndrome. Temple Grandin, PhD of Animal Science and professor, is a person with high-functioning autism, and has written quite a bit on the subject. In her book Thinking in Pictures: Autism and Visual Thought, Grandin discusses her unique way of

thinking about things as an autistic person, and how she must adjust to the way the rest of the world is structured. She states:

> I THINK IN PICTURES. Words are like a second language to me. I translate both spoken and written words into full-color movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head. When somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures. Language-based thinkers often find this phenomenon difficult to understand, but in my job as an equipment designer for the livestock industry, visual thinking is a tremendous advantage. (Grandin)

The way Grandin thinks and learns is completely different from the way most schools teach their students, and, on account of that, she has gone through her life "thinking in pictures" rather than learning with words. Like a child who is an auditory learner rather than a visual one, the way an autistic person learns should not be considered a detriment, merely a difference.

As a society, this is something that needs to be learned when it comes to facing autism, for the autistic child will often not actually be less intelligent than other children, just will be performing poorly in school because their way of learning is simply not offered to that child. In Christopher's case, this is certainly true, for throughout the novel we are witness to his unique thought processes and pictures, and know him to be just as smart as any other child his age, or probably even more so. But because schools that teach in his way are not available, he is placed in classes with children who are drastically below his intelligence level. If the world were filled with people who learned the way Christopher did, he would not be viewed as disabled. Grandin continues to discuss her way of processing information, and how this has affected her life and career, and even gives us a glimpse into the way her own mind works, saying:

> Unlike those of most people, my thoughts move from video like, specific images to generalization and concepts. For example, my concept of dogs is inextricably linked to every dog I've ever known. It's as if I have a card catalog of dogs I have seen, complete with pictures, which continually grows as I add more examples to my video library. If I think about Great Danes, the first memory that pops into my head is Dansk, the Great Dane owned by the headmaster at my high school. The next Great Dane I visualize is Helga, who was Dansk's replacement. The next is my aunt's dog in Arizona, and my final image comes from an advertisement for Fitwell seat covers that featured that kind of dog. My memories usually appear in my imagination in strict chronological order, and the images I visualize are always specific. There is no generic, generalized Great Dane. (Grandin)

Grandin's thought process is not wrong, it's only different from what is considered the "norm". Children with autism should not be faulted for thinking in a different way than their peers, because that is just the way their mind works. And, as Grandin says, not all autistic people think the same way, either. She notes that, while she is a visual learner, others who suffer from autism are verbal and non-visual, preferring to process things in a logical way rather than through pictures. There is no easy way to define this disability, as one can define a broken arm or leg. Autism is simply something that people live with every day and cannot be 'cured' of, and should be appreciated as such.

According to the DSM-IV, "Asperser's syndrome is distinguished by a pattern of symptoms rather than a single symptom". (DSM-IV Criteria) It is characterized by "qualitative impairment in social interaction, by stereotyped and restricted patterns of behavior, activities and interests, and by no clinically significant delay in cognitive development or general delay in

language" (Kutscher). Also present is a fixation or obsession with a particular subject, and often verbosity. These traits are normally fairly easy to diagnose when recognized early enough, but the life of a person with Asperger's or autism can be extremely difficult for themselves and those around them.

The social impairments of autism tend to be the most recognizable quality about the disease to those observing it, but "these tendencies are usually not noticed until preschool or kindergarten, when the child is put into a social setting different than the one they encounter in their home setting" (DSM-IV Criteria). The teacher or parent may notice a tendency to avoid spontaneity, or a tendency to make odd statements and repeat phrases. If the people around the child are not educated as to the child's disorder, an autistic child is immediately seen as different or wrong because they are not able to make friends the way other children their age do. They want to be accepted by their peers, in most cases, but find it extremely difficult to do so.

Different from those who are autistic, people with Asperger's syndrome tend to not be withdrawn and often approach others, although awkwardly. They may engage in a speech on their favorite topic, like perhaps molecular structure or square roots, and not read the listener's social cues for them to stop. This social ineptness can often lead to bullying, hazing and teasing, which further increases their anxiety and feelings of withdrawal. "Adolescence can also be extremely stressful for a child suffering from autism or Asperger's, because the very social skills they lack are vital to development in the teenage years" (DSM-IV Criteria).

Another noted aspect of Asperger's syndrome is the perceived lack of empathy coming from the person. This is seen as one of the most dysfunctional effects of this disorder, as it is often believed that one cannot survive in a society with no empathy. Their inability to reciprocate emotion can make an individual suffering from Asperger's extremely confusing to any person

who encounters them, and their failure to react to the needs of others may come across as rude or insensitive.

People with autism or Asperger's often display a repetitive nature, and the tendency to fixate on certain topics is also a trait of this disorder. "Their schedules are planned, inflexible, and routine, and any change to this order can result in a sensory overload" (Kutscher). People who suffer from Asperger's syndrome, in particular, are noted for having an extreme interest in one particular area of a topic, while not showing the same intense focus on the topic as a whole. Christopher shows examples of this throughout the novel, explaining his interest in maths and astronomy to the reader in such detail that his information is often difficult to follow.

I have chosen to include these specific traits in this order for a reason: they all build onto each other to form the disability that is known as autism or Asperger's. When a child is small, often the first thing noted is the social impairment. Almost because of this impairment, the other traits begin to show themselves, and, by the time the child old enough to be independent, their disability has taken its full form. Although autism exists well into adulthood, people often associate it only with children, because it is during this time that the disability has its most detrimental effects.

After discussing all that autism is, there are several things that it certainly is not. Autism is not a gift and does not bestow upon those who have it genius powers. Autism/Asperger's has long been associated with savants, even though the two do not always occur together. Autism is also not something that can be magically cured. There is no cast or splint for autism: it's present for life. And autism is most certainly not a negative thing or something of which to be afraid. The press autism has sometimes gotten overlooks the individuality of the disability, and it can become, just a bundle of symptoms.

Autism in popular culture, when present, tends to be exaggerated to the point that the person with the disorder is no longer an individual, rather a walking 'disease', as it were. Much of the public perception of autism is based on its portrayals in novels, biographies, movies, and TV series. Many of these portrayals have been inaccurate, and have contributed to a harmful divergence between public perception and the clinical reality of autism. Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man* is an example of this, for his lead character, while autistic, is also a savant, a trait not always associated with autism. Due to this movie, and other examples like it, savant skills have become a feature immediately associated with autism, and this stereotype is wholly untrue, as most people who suffer from autism do not possess savant skills.

It is not easy to define autism or Asperger's, because every individual who lives with these disorders has different symptoms. While there are general traits, as described above, there is no way to truly define what is to be "expected" of a person with autism or Asperger's, because the disability can cause different reactions within different people.

Disability Studies

The study of disability in literature does not get much press at this point in time. People often know how to look at a work from a feminist or race perspective, but asking people to analyze a disability within literature is something out of the norm for most. Many people are unsure of how to react around those with a disability, and therefore treat them in one of a few ways, one of the most common being to ignore them completely. In the book Understanding Disability, authors Paul Jaeger and Cynthia Bowman discuss this tendency in greater detail:

> The most basic social reaction to disability may be to pretend that it is not there. Of course, pretending disability does not exist also means pretending that people with disabilities do not exist. (Jaeger 18)

There are no written rules for how those without disabilities are to treat those who do, and often people with disabilities are made uncomfortable by the actions of those without. If a person without a disability offers help to one with, this can been seen as disempowering, while the latter's subsequent refusal for assistance might be seen as bitter by the former. These sorts of social faux pas and rules are not documented anywhere, and exist in a different form for each person. What is society to do? Why, stereotype against those with disability, *naturally.*

As discussed earlier in my paper, people often classify those with disabilities stereotypes, and for a person to break free of these is extremely rare. As we saw with Lennie in Of Mice and Men, a disabled person can be viewed as simple and 'dumb'. Often disabled characters, usually those with a physical disability, are viewed as bitter towards the rest of the world. Another stereotype, which might seem complimentary, is that of a person 'overcoming' their disability, as Jaeger and Bowman note in their book:

> Turning a person with a disability into a hero is another common social reaction. This reaction is interesting – on the surface it appears to be positive, but it is actually a different type of negative reaction…[Comments such as "You're so strong to be living with a disability"], though they show comprehension of the impacts of a disability, also serve to distance the person with a disability from the speaker. A disability is always there and living with it is not a heroic act. It is simply one way of living. To make a person with a disability a hero or an inspiration serves to distance the person with the disability from 'normal'. (22)

So, if people without disabilities are putting those with them into these individual stereotypes, how is that to make those with disorders or physical ailments feel? Cut off from the world, and, due to the stereotyping they encounter, this is certainly warranted. Almost 36 million people in America alone have some form of mental, physical, developmental or emotional disabilities. This makes them one of the largest minorities in America today, but many people do not realize that they are consciously putting the disabled into a minority category. Each person is a part of the problem facing those with disabilities, for while we might not be aware, society puts barriers in front of those with disabilities on a fairly regular basis, and each one of us is part of the problem. "People have erected these barriers, and people can eliminate them" (Bowe, xiii).

So what can be done about the stigmas facing those with disabilities? Make an attempt to defy them, naturally. While the characters in the novels mentioned earlier certainly played into the stereotypes of disability, at least their disability was noted. Literature is an extremely effective way to open the public's eye to the world facing those with disability. John Quicke notes this in his book Disability in Modern Children's Fiction:

> ...fiction can provide a total picture of the experience of disability in the context of a story which captures the imagination of the reader. The child reads him or herself into the world created by the author, and by doing so begins to see, almost without realizing it, how disability functions in a particular social, emotional and even historical context. (Quicke 5)

In Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical disability in American Culture and Literature, Rosemarie Thompson discusses how the stigma of disability affects disabled characters in literature, stating "Because disability is so strongly stigmatized and is countered by so few mitigating narratives, the literary traffic in metaphors often misrepresents or flattens the

experience real people have of their own or others' disabilities" (Thompson 9) In fiction, this is changing for the better, which leads to the novel about which this entire thesis was written: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time by Mark Haddon, published in 2003.

Close Reading

The title of the novel, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time is taken from the story *Silver Blaze*, which is a Sherlock Holmes mystery. The exact dialogue this is mentioned in is as follows:

> Gregory (Scotland Yard Detective): "Is there any other point to which you would draw my attention?"
>
> Holmes: "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."
>
> Gregory: "The dog did nothing in the night-time."
>
> Holmes: That was the curious incident." (Conan Doyle)

While the knowledge of the plot of this particular Sherlock Holmes story is certainly not central to the plot of Haddon's novel, an understanding of the man that was the famous detective certainly is. Christopher states that The Hound of the Baskervilles is his favorite novel, and then proceeds to give the reader a brief synopsis of the story and the bits he did not like, especially when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of the Sherlock Holmes series, describes faces, in which he has no interest. Christopher claims to like The Hound of the Baskervilles because it is a mystery novel, full of clues and Red Herrings, but this is not the only reason. Christopher states that "…I like Sherlock Holmes and I think that if I were a proper detective he is the kind of detective I would be" (Haddon 92). Christopher identifies with Sherlock Holmes, as much as he can identify with anyone, because Holmes is a logical and observant person, much like

Christopher. Holmes also has the ability to detach himself from his emotions when solving a mystery, as Christopher seems to be throughout his entire life. Reading about Sherlock Holmes and sharing similar traits with him is enjoyable for the narrator, because he feels that Holmes is successful and smart, which means that he can be, too. This particular quote is significant because it shows us one of the few role models with whom Christopher identifies, for the reader is accustomed to seeing him treat his elders with a sense of apathy.

Upon opening the novel, one thing that the reader might notice is the fact that it doesn't start off with Chapter 1 rather there is a large 2 at the top of the page. The book is divided up into chapters labeled by prime numbers, chosen by Christopher because he likes them, although the reader does not discover the reason for this until chapter 19. Christopher's explanation for using these numbers is simple: he likes them, and finds them to be very useful: "I think prime numbers are like life. They are very logical but you could never work out the rules, even if you spend all your time thinking abut them" (Haddon 15). This choice could seem to be a random one, but even this small detail of the book gives the reader insight into how Christopher works. He prefers the logical, it is how he thinks, which is different than the way many other students around Christopher think. As learned with Temple Grandin, each autistic person might have their own way of thinking which is different than the norm, and they should be taught in a way that encourages their own learning style, rather than 'ours'.

By labeling the chapters of his novel in his own unique way, Christopher is asserting that the story is, in fact, his, and nobody else's. He likes prime numbers, so he uses them, He enjoys visual pictures, and he also uses these in his novel, which will be explained more later. Christopher is creating his own plot and his own world, which forces the reader to view things from his perspective. This is an attempt on Haddon's part for the reader to put him or herself into

Christopher's shoes and see the world the way he does, something that is not often seen in novels concerning disability. The reader tends to want to be separate from the person on the page when that person happens to be disabled, and "the plot or the work's rhetorical potential usually benefits from the disabled characters remaining other to the reader – identifiably human but resolutely different" (Thomson 11). In Extraordinary Bodies, Thomson uses the character of Ahab in Moby Dick as an example of this: the reader sees into the mind of the stable Ishmael, rather than the impassioned Ahab, because 'crazy' like that is best observed from afar.

The main structure of the novel is also worth noting, for it is broken up intermittently by diagrams and drawings Christopher has created, such as a chart depicting how to figure out which numbers are prime and which are not. This illustrates his tendency towards visual learning, and also his eagerness to have the reader understand what it is exactly that he is talking about. He is discussing a math problem at one point in the novel, and wishes to show the reader how he figured it out, but is then told by Siobhan, one of his teachers, that nobody else would find it interesting. This clearly does not stop Christopher, who puts the problem in an appendix at the back of the book instead, for those who want to read it. Although Christopher might not be extremely relatable to every person reading his story, he seems to want them to understand his way, and, much like Temple Grandin, has no problem explaining that. The chapters seem to alternate, or at least be divided evenly, between chapters that are concerned with the mystery plot of the novel, and those that concern Christopher himself, such as his affinity for Sherlock Holmes. This alternation digresses sometimes into seemingly unconnected subjects, such as the Cottingley Fairies or his atheism, but when taken with the novel as a whole, these chapters are necessary because they give the reader perspective on Christopher's strong stance on logic and what is real to him.

The novel starts off with the curious incident mentioned in the title. Christopher finds his neighbor's dog in her front yard, presumably stabbed to death with a garden fork. While this is an occurrence that many individuals would find emotionally distressing, Christopher maintains an extremely matter-of-fact tone. He first notes the dog, thinking it is possibly sleeping, or could be mistaken for such, "but the dog was not running or asleep. The dog was dead. There was a garden fork sticking out of the dog" (Haddon 1). Christopher does not seem to realize the potentially harmful nature of this situation, nor does he seem to have any feelings about the death of the dog. His concern is more with the detail of the crime scene, the sort of dog Wellington was, and the identity of his murderer.

With this startling first encounter, and Christopher's reaction to it, the reader is prepared for the way much of the novel will be conducted. Christopher is not an emotional narrator, and, as he relays in the following chapter, often has problems deciphering the feelings of people around him, or even what feelings and emotions are. He carries around a sheet of paper, given to him by his teacher, Siobhan, that is covered with simple line drawings of faces people make when they are feeling certain emotions, such as a frown for sadness, or a furrowing of the brow for anger. These faces and drawings are an attempt for Christopher to understand what another person in a conversation was feeling by reading their facial expressions.

This is the first sign the reader receives of Christopher's disability, but this impairment does not seem to bother him. Rather, he has a fairly matter-of-fact opinion about it, stating "it was very difficult to decide which of the diagrams was most like the face they were making because people's faces move very quickly" (Haddon 3). Christopher pulls out his sheet of paper to decipher the emotions of others, and seems to find no problem with this. His teacher, Siobhan, finds it humorous, though, prompting Christopher to throw away his piece of paper, and simply

to ask people what they mean from that point on, or to give up on them entirely and walk away. His way of coping with Siobhan's teasing shows the reader a hint of the misunderstandings Christopher deals with on a fairly regular basis.

Here, in the very beginning of the novel, Haddon has already introduced his readers to one of the classic signs of autism/Asperger's disorder. It is too early in the book for a reader to be able to 'diagnose' Christopher, certainly, but this trait about him makes him immediately a very different narrator, and prepares the reader for the kind of adventure they are getting into with Christopher at the wheel. This non-emotional aspect of Christopher's disorder is mentioned throughout the novel several times, and causes several misunderstandings on the part of the individual characters. Haddon does not hide this 'negative' aspect of Christopher's disorder, rather he lays it out as a particular aspect of his personality, and something that the reader grows to expect throughout the novel. This can either serve to educate the reader, making him or her more aware of the symptoms of autism, or it can push them away, causing the reader to find little understanding of Christopher. Both of these are valid reactions, and certainly ones that people have had whilst reading the novel.

The next major occurrence in the book shows us immediately the difficult character that many will begin to see Christopher as. After finding the dog, he decides to hug him, because he likes dogs, because "you always know what a dog is thinking. It has four moods. Happy, sad, cross and concentrating" (Haddon 4). Christopher then proceeds to hug the dog, which shows the reader that he does, in fact, feel sadness for the animal. He does not understand the many moods of human beings, as explained by the diagrams, and therefore prefers dogs, rats, or any other animal because they are simpler. Temple Grandin has many of these feelings as well, having worked in slaughterhouses in order to make the process less frightening for the animals. She

states, "I can imagine the sensations the animals must feel. If I had a calf's body and hooves, I would be very scared to step on a slippery metal ramp" (Grandin). She has also published two books called Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior and the subsequent Animals Make Us Human: Creating the Best Life for Animals, both of which discuss the emotional needs of the animals around us, not merely the physical ones. Christopher and Temple Grandin both have the ability to put themselves into the metaphorical shoes of animals, for they find them much easier to understand.

While this statement of Christopher's seems to be a fairly accurate one for an autistic character to make, it is an *interesting* statement for Haddon to have Christopher make because it could risk offending the reader. If the reader ever were to meet him, chances are Christopher would not like or trust him or her, no matter how kind that person truly was. Haddon has created a character that a reader would probably never want to meet, and this certainly did turn some people off of this book, based on the amazon.com reviews. As we discover later in the novel, though, Christopher is a person outside of his symptoms of autism/Asperger's, and a rather endearing one at that. Whether he is hugging the dog found in Mrs. Shears' front yard, or caring for his pet rat Toby, Christopher does care about things in his life: they just might be different than what 'normal' people think is important.

The major point of this chapter, however, is not Christopher's liking for dogs, rather it is his lack of comprehension when it comes to human beings. His social awkwardness comes into play, and the reader sees a realistic depiction of how this situation would play out for a person with autism. Mrs. Shears, the neighbor and owner of Wellington, walks out and sees Christopher holding her dead dog. She becomes upset, rightfully so, and begins to shout at him. This bothers Christopher, as he says, "I do not like people shouting at me. It makes me scared that they are

going to hit me or touch me and I do not know what is going to happen" (Haddon 4). The way Christopher handles this situation is baffling to anyone who does not understand his disorder, and only serves to irritate his neighbor more. This whole situation escalates into Christopher rolling his forehead into the grass, cutting himself off from the world and the woman screaming at him. This is not a 'normal' way to handle this sort of a situation, by any means, and sometimes the things Christopher does in his frustrations are simply incomprehensible to an outside observer. But Haddon is being honest with his portrayal, and that is something that is to be admired. He does not present the image of a 'quirky' disability, or one that simply makes a person antisocial, because that is not the way things work in true life.

This sensory overload, as it are called within the autistic community, is something that occurs several times throughout the novel, and always ends with Christopher 'groaning' over the sound of the yelling or the chaos, and trying to make the situation go away entirely. For a reader to be confronted with this kind of a situation this early in the book is a risky move for Haddon to make according to the normal disability in literature standards, but he has his reasons. Showing the reader the struggles Christopher goes through on a day-to-day basis pushes the reader out of their familiarity with disability and prepares that person to open his or her mind for the rest of the novel. There is no way a person can read the character of Christopher with a stereotype already ingrained into his or her head and come away from the book truly appreciating the person he is. Haddon is aiming, early on in the novel, to break down any preconceptions that the reader might have about Christopher or his disability. These ideas might include things learned from pop culture, such as automatically assuming that the narrator is a savant, or simply even a lack of knowledge about the disability, like thinking that Christopher is completely incapable of living

his own independent life. Christopher is able to break down these falsities by proving himself to be an individual, but also showing that he is a person living with a disability.

Now that the story has its rather dramatic beginning, we see it begin to unfold. After the encounter with Wellington and Mrs. Shears, Christopher writes a chapter about the book we are reading, stating, "This is a murder mystery novel" (Haddon 5). By the end of the novel, it is evident that this work is no such thing, but, in Christopher's mind, he is solving the mystery of Who Killed Wellington? and has no inklings otherwise. He likes murder mystery novels because they are like a puzzle, which he enjoys, as evidenced by the several puzzle diagrams littered through the work. The novel quickly loses its murder mystery feel, moving instead into an adventure/coming-of-age novel. We are no longer solving the mystery of the dog in the nighttime, the reader is now observing Christopher and solving the mystery of him, as a character. It is interesting to note that several readers cited this change in genre as their reason for not enjoying the book as much as they might have had it stayed as a mystery work.

But what exactly is the correct way to classify this novel? How does one approach The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time from a literary, analytical perspective? I have followed Christopher's lead, and chosen to do so in an extremely logical way: by looking a Christopher first, the person who he is and how he works internally, second by looking at his relationships with the world and people around him and vice versa, and, finally, Christopher's 'dream'.

Christopher as an Individual

As stated before, the sections of plot in this novel are often interrupted by the musings of our narrator, sometimes concerned with what is happening in the mystery, but often times, not.

While this might be extremely frustrating to some readers, it was done with good reason. With a character such as Christopher, and a novel such as this, it could be easy for a reader to get lost in the seriousness of the text, or the framing of Christopher as a walking disability. Often times, Haddon is writing these thoughtful interludes to show the reader that his creation is *not* just autism talking, but a living child, who wonders about the same things many other children do. He questions why his parents often did not get along, and, even though this might be beyond the realm of thinking of some children Christopher's age, often wonders about his own future, and who he will become. But, oftentimes, Christopher makes comments that are extremely aware and mature, and, with the narrator's token dryness, these phrases are memorable.

An example of this comes after the encounter with Mrs. Shears and the assaulting of a police officer, which will be discussed in-depth later. After reading an extremely emotionally draining scene, the reader turns the page to find chapter 13, starting with the line "This will not be a funny book" (10). Christopher explains that he cannot tell jokes because he does not understand them, and uses an example of a joke his father had told him, "His face was drawn but the curtains were real" (Haddon 10). Christopher is aware of the fact that this is meant to be funny, for the sentence has a triple meaning, and he asked his father what the meanings were. But when he tries to process that in his mind, the fact that the word has three meanings, his thoughts become entirely jumbled. "And that is why there are no jokes in this book" (Haddon 10).

This simple, one-page chapter might not seem effective, but, if the reader stops to think about it throughout the novel, there are several instances when Christopher does not understand something that is being said to him, not because he is "slow" or "dumb", simply because he cannot wrap his mind around the idea of this joke like his father, or other people can. Christopher

is not just stating that he does not understand these statements, and leaving them at that, he is explaining to the reader why he does not understand them, and how his mind works differently. This shows an awareness of his condition, and a maturity beyond most teens of his age, traits which help him to defy the stereotypes that people have put in front of him. He often finds concepts difficult to understand that are, when pondered, rather confusing, and his statements make the reader acknowledge and sometimes even see eye-to-eye with his opinions.

Christopher also has a way of making a reader doubt if their actions are the ones that are correct, or if his way of thinking is right all along, and this is certainly intentional on Haddon's part. As was mentioned before, Christopher finds people terribly confusing and difficult to read. He discusses how people sometimes talk without using words, and, as we saw earlier with the smiley face pictures, he often does not comprehend these meanings. Christopher is not deliberate in his ignorance of these nonverbal forms of communication: he simply does not comprehend what exactly it is they are supposed to mean. In a conversation with Siobhan, he discusses this, saying, "Siobhan says that if you raise one eyebrow it can mean lots of different things. It can mean 'I want to do sex with you' and it can also mean 'I think what you just said was very stupid'" (Haddon 19). When these two meanings of the same movement are sat next to each other like this, the reader might realize that Christopher has a point after all. Christopher's simple yet effective dialogue serves not only to educate the reader, it also is meant to make them question the things that he or she does so nonchalantly on a regular basis, like the raising of an eyebrow.

This different point of view not only helps the reader to understand Christopher's disability, it gives him or her a way to rethink all of that person's firm beliefs about the way the world is run. His monologues serve to show the reader a different way of looking at the things

around us. Within the same rant, Christopher also brings up his confusion in regards to metaphors. Although he probably did not mean it to be so, this entire passage is quite humorous, just because what he is saying is completely true, and we use these metaphors without a second thought:

> These are examples of metaphors: I laughed my socks off. He was the apple of her eye. They had a skeleton in the cupboard. We had a real pig of a day. The dog was stone dead…I think [these words] should be called a lie because a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboards. And when I try and make a picture of the phrase in my head it just confuses me because imagining an apple in someone's eye doesn't have anything to do with liking someone a lot and it makes you forget what the person was talking about. (Haddon 19)

While not intentional, this passage, when read, is hilarious, because it is so completely true. Metaphors are rather confusing, and having a fresh and new perspective on this makes something that people use regularly seem rather odd. The reader realizes this after reading it, and perhaps this causes him or her to immediately spend time thinking of times when a completely ridiculous metaphor has been used. The problem with this confusion that Christopher has is that society does not cater to people who think as he does. Phrases such as the ones Christopher mentions, and many more, are commonplace in the English language, as well as others. For an English as a Second Language learner, it is understandable why saying "The band brought the house down" would be confusing, but why is no thought given to those like Christopher, who simply are not able to process what these phrases mean? While he is not an outsider in the same way as a foreign exchange student, Christopher still gives the reader an outsider perspective on things in the world that many view as commonplace.

Christopher, along with having an understanding of his disability, also seems to understand that, while he is not like everyone else around him, he is not entirely different, either. Throughout the book, we are shown his tendencies to "like" certain things while hating others. He has Good Days when red cars are seen, while Black Days when 4 yellow cars are viewed in a row on his bus ride to school:

> Mr. Jeavons, the psychologist at the school, once asked me why 4 red cars in a row made it a Good Day, and 3 red cars in a row made it a Quite Good Day, and 5 red cars in a row made it a Super Good Day, and why 4 yellow cars in a row made it a Black Day, which is a day when I don't speak to anyone and sit on my own reading books and don't eat my lunch and Take No Risks. He said that I was clearly a very logical person, so he was surprised that I should think like this because it wasn't very logical. (Haddon 31)

In the next paragraph, Christopher justifies his tendencies towards the different color cars by saying that he likes things to be in a nice order and to be logical, and this was just his own way of being logical, no different from somebody saying that the weather can have an impact upon their day when it shouldn't because they sit in an office building while at work. (Haddon 31) It is these moments of clarity that shine through and make the reader realize that Christopher is maybe seeing the big picture of life clearer than his audience and the people around him. Why is it okay when people let the weather control their mood, but when Christopher is affected by his favorite color car, this is deemed illogical? Our society makes this division, and, after reading what Christopher has said, that in itself seems highly illogical.

He also justifies his dislike of brown and yellow in a later chapter after being told by a teacher that hating these two colors is simply silly. Something unique about this moment,

though, is that Christopher realizes his feelings about certain colors is, in fact, slightly silly, but justifies it in its own right.

> But in life you have to take lots of decisions and if you don't take decisions you would never do anything because you would spend all your time choosing between things you could do. So it is a good thing to have a reason why you hate some things and you like others. It is like being in a restaurant like when Father takes me out to a Berni Inn sometimes and you look at the menu and you have to choose what you are going to have. But you don't know yet if you are going to like something because you haven't tasted it yet, so you have favorite foods and you choose these, and you have foods you don't like and you don't choose these, and then it is simple. (Haddon 107)

The reader here struggles with a dilemma of accepting that Christopher is truly right when it comes to this matter. He or she has been witness to his odd actions and traits, and seeing something that is so glaringly obvious come out of the mouth of this 'disabled' person is quite a change from the Christopher who, just in the chapter before this, was physically assaulting his father because he made him feel uncomfortable. Haddon is illustrating to the reader that, when it comes to disability, often only the stereotypical image is presented. Certainly Christopher can be difficult because of his autism, but he is also smart far beyond his years, and has firm morals and beliefs that are unshaken, even when it comes to the displeasure of others.

These two instances also play into one of Haddon's main objectives with this book: to normalize disability without making it confirm to the normal. Literature is the perfect place to do this, because, as Thomson notes, "Besides stripping any normalizing context away from disability, literary representation sets up static encounters between disabled figures and normate readers" (11). Here in his novel, Haddon has a stage upon which he can play Christopher to a

willing audience, to illustrate to them things that would possibly never have crossed their mind because they had not been faced with it before. This autistic boy can speak volumes for the autistic community, because he is on the other side of a page and non-disabled readers will not feel as uncomfortable with this situation as they might be faced with a case of autism in their lives. As much as it should be different, and all people should be accepted by society, it simply is not, although Christopher is a step in the right direction. At this moment, disability is positioned somewhere between normal and 'other', and, much like the shades of gray between black and white, it should not be forced to blend with one side or the other.

Anther viewpoint-redefining moment comes a few chapters later in the book after Christopher's father has told him not to investigate the murder of Wellington any further, and to stay out of other people's business. He decides to push the issue regardless, stating "This is because I do not always do what I am told" (Haddon 38). He goes on to say that people are not always clear about what they want from him, and uses several examples of this.

> Also people break rules all the time. For example, Father often drives at over 30 mph in a 30 mph zone and sometimes he drives when he has been drinking and often he doesn't wear a seatbelt when he is driving his van. And in the Bible it says Thou shalt not kill but there were the Crusades and two World Wars and the Gulf War and there were Christians killing people in all of them (38).

Here, Christopher shows a greater sense of understanding than many people who have spent years arguing over the hypocrisy of the world. For a reader, to have these arguments laid simply in front of them is a revelation, because they are things that, because of our society rules, are taboo to question. Christopher has an extreme sense of right and wrong, and while it is

simplified, it is still true. This passage agrees with the earlier ones, that sometimes Christopher has more of a defined sense of what is happening in the world than those around him.

But, sometimes the reader with struck with just exactly how severe Christopher's situation is. When these follow his moments of exceptional clarity, the contrast makes them all the more heart-breaking to witness. But the sadness is of a different sort than that given to Tiny Tim, or other stock disabled characters. We do not feel pity for Christopher, because we realize he has a signature personality. He is smart, he is witty, and he is also disabled. The sadness we feel for Christopher is rather because of the people around him, who seem to have no understanding of his disorder, or how it makes him react to things.

The reactions of the people around Christopher

When speaking to his neighbor, Mrs. Alexander, Christopher discovers things about his mother he had not known before, and, because of his naiveté , he struggles to comprehend what exactly she is saying to him:

> And Mrs. Alexander said, 'Your mother, before she died, was very good friends with Mr. Shears.'
>
> And I said, 'I know.'
>
> And she said, 'No, Christopher. I'm not sure that you do. I mean that they were very good friends. Very, very good friends.'
>
> I thought about this for a while and said, 'Do you mean that they were doing sex?'
>
> And Mrs. Alexander said, 'Yes, Christopher. That is what I mean.'

After learning this information, Christopher is strangely unaffected, choosing to leave Mrs. Alexander in the park and head home. Learning this knowledge would have had a profound

effect upon many people who consider themselves to be in touch with their emotions, and the fact that this conversation does not seem to upset Christopher at all makes the audience feel pity for him in a way that seldom happens throughout the course of the novel. But this is not because of his disability: this is simply because the audience is beginning to realize how much has been hidden from Christopher throughout his life.

The way Christopher interacts with others is certainly one of the focal points of the novel, for many instances revolve around how he reacts to what has occurred around him. When he finds the letters written to him by his mother, we see how Christopher reacts. When he is helped in the train station by a police officer, we see how Christopher reacts. And, most importantly, we see how the people in the world around him are affected by the actions of Christopher, and the reader has to wonder how the people in his life can react this way to him when it is so clear he has no comprehension of the way the world works. But the difference is that, by reading the novel, the reader is given a glimpse into Christopher's thoughts, and we can see how and why he reacts to things, or at least have an idea as to why. We know that being touched by people is upsetting to him, but the cop who arrests him in front of Mrs. Shears' house did not know this. We know that loud busy places overwhelm him, but the people in the train station do not know this. By reading Christopher's story, we see his reasoning behind things, and understand, or at least partially, the way he works. We are sometimes even put into his shoes, or shown the way he sees things when he is upset. The people around him in his story are not quite as lucky.

In The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime, the only person who seems remotely aware of what sort of disability Christopher has and how to handle it is Siobhan, one of his teachers/counselors at school. With every chapter, the reader sees another example of someone within the novel becoming frustrated with Christopher because of his traits, and even

his parents show signs of nearing their wit's end. Seeing how the people in the boy's life react to his disability is truly heartbreaking, for the situations that upset them are truly beyond his control. And this sense of resentment or chagrin does not merely stay within the pages of the novel: sometimes it even extends to the reader, as evidenced by the negative Amazon.com reviews.

On a day-to-day basis, Christopher finds himself in situations with people he does not trust, or 'strangers', as he calls them. These would not be considered strangers in the ordinary usage of the word, as most children would not think of the friendly elderly woman from across the street as a stranger. But, most likely due to some rule given to him by his father, Christopher considers everyone other than his family and Siobhan to be untrustworthy and does not give these individuals any clue as to why he is acting in the way he does. Christopher's parents have raised him to believe that the world, except for those few in it, is out to hurt him, and this has had a severe effect on the way he views the world. For a small child, these sorts of rules are typical, if not necessary. But Christopher is a teenager, and just as much as his parents have taught him to fear strangers, he is aware of his own dislike of them.

> I do not like strangers because I do not like people I have never met before. They are hard to understand…It takes me a long time to get used to people I do not know. For example, when there is a new member of staff at school I do not talk to them for weeks and weeks. I just watch them until I know they are safe. Then I ask them questions about themselves, like whether they have pets and what is their favorite color and what do they know about the Apollo space missions and I get them to draw a plan of their house and I ask them what kind of car they drive, so I get to know them. Then I don't mind if I am in the same room as them and don't have to watch them all the time.

> So talking to the other people in our street was brave. But if you are going to do detective work you have to be brave, so I had no choice. (Haddon 45-6)

These two paragraphs seem highly contradictory, even though they are sequential. Christopher's dislike or distrust of strangers is both a result of his condition and his coddling by his parents, his father, in particular.

The interaction between Christopher and authority figures, especially the police, is one extremely interesting because it shows the reader how Christopher might act when encountered with something that does not fulfill his expectations of it. The police arrive when called by Mrs. Shears, who was alarmed by Christopher and the sight of her dead dog. Originally, Christopher is calmed by the sight of the police, and claims to like them, possibly even trust them. "They have uniforms and numbers and you know what they are meant to be doing" (Haddon 7). This soon changes when the policeman does not live up to Christopher's expectations, and does not give him enough time to answer the policeman's questions, even though Christopher wanted to. Soon, though, the encounter turns sour when the policeman tires of Christopher's vague answers and physically grabs his arm. "And that's when I hit him" (Haddon 9).

Here the reader is introduced to the violent side of Christopher, or at least as violent as he can become towards others. This occurs later on in the book during an incident with his father, but Christopher becoming simply overwhelmed with his surroundings causes both of these situations, and lashing out in the only ways he knows how. As stated before, he has a supposed block in expressing his emotions, and by physically assaulting the person who has made him feel anxious, he is dealing with the situation in his own way. Although this occurs fairly early in the book, Haddon has already built empathy for Christopher in this situation by showing his side of the story, and how his brain reacts when the policeman grabs his arm. This explanation does not

try in any way to excuse Christopher's violence, it just shows a realistic scenario. If the policeman had been aware of how to act around people with autism, this confrontation could have been avoided.

After the chapter about jokes, the plot line with the policeman returns. Christopher is showing no regret or remorse for what he has done rather he feels calmer, because "[I'm arresting you] is what policemen say on television and in films" (Haddon 11). His expectations are back to where they were before, and although he is being taken to a police station, this is calming because it has a rhyme and reason and the formal procedure makes sense to him.

As evidenced by the encounter with the policeman, the general public in Christopher's life has no chance of interacting with him without him reacting to the confrontation. It is curious, then, that Christopher decides to investigate the murder of Wellington as much as he does, since this would most assuredly put him in contact with people he deems as strangers. Here we are shown a conflict of interest between Christopher's desires and his disorder, which actually occurs several times during the novel. He wishes to pursue the murder of Wellington, but realizes this would put him into contact with strangers, like the people who live next door, and this is ultimately something he does not like. His personality and desires are fighting his disability within his own mind, but this never falls into the stock "overcoming narrative", for Christopher, rather than trying to be cured, is just slowly learning how to live with his disability.

But, along with Christopher learning how to live with his disability, the people in his life around him need to learn how to live with *him*. An encounter with his father shows the reader that Christopher is often a challenge for even his family, whom he claims to trust and 'care about', as much as he is able. It also illustrates the fact that his parents are still unaware of how to treat him, for his father goes from warning him about strangers to cursing at him within

chapters. Chapter 127, brief but poignant, shows the encounter between Christopher and his father when the latter finds the book that the former has been writing, namely the book that the reader is currently holding. While going against a parent's wishes may be a typical reaction for a teenage boy, the reader soon learns that Christopher's father is hiding something rather important and is therefore a bit over-the-top in this scene. Throughout the confrontation, Christopher shows no remorse for what he has done, specifically that he has gone against his father's wishes. While He rather says that, by relaxing his guard, he allowed his father to find his book by accident, and this must never be done if one is to become a true detective. The conflict is witnessed only through Christopher's rather detached point of view, and one has to wonder if this bit would have been as powerful as it is had the narrator been giving us all of the passion and anger that he or she felt at the time. Instead, we are witness to this, which occurs after Christopher's father grabs his arm in anger :

> I don't like it when people grab me. And I don't like being surprised either. So I hit him, like I hit the policeman when he took hold of me arms and lifted me onto my feet. But Father didn't let go, and he was shouting. And I hit him again. And then I didn't know what I was doing anymore.
>
> I had no memories for a short while. I know it was a short while because I checked my watch afterwards. It was like someone had switched me off and then switched me on again. And when they switched me on again I was sitting on the carpet with my back against the wall and there was blood on my right hand and the side of my head was hurting. And Father was standing on the carpet a metre in front of me looking down at me and he was still holding my book in his right hand, but it was bent in half and

all the corners were messed up, and there was a scratch on his neck and a bit rip in the sleeve of his green and blue check shirt and he was breathing really deeply. (Haddon 103)

This is a powerful passage, to be sure. But it is not powerful in the way that most angry confrontations are powerful, it is not overwhelming and feeling inducing. It is, rather, understated and thought provoking. Here, the reader realizes for the first time that maybe Christopher acts the way he does not only because of his disability, but possibly because the people who raised him had no idea how to treat an autistic child. The anger Christopher's father shows towards him in this passage is understandable, but no amount of anger should ever involve putting your own child in an emotionally distressing situation.

Christopher's father is an admirable character in his own right, but, as we learn through the book's progression, is one that soon violates the extremely fragile trust of his son. His son is certainly a difficult character to create, and it would be even more difficult to care for him on a daily basis. His father is his family, but no closer to understanding his ways than his teacher at school or the policeman. He is simply cooler-tempered than most, and therefore does not react to Christopher's actions as strongly. In the above passage, we see that Christopher's father is at the end of his rope raising a disabled child on his own, and seems to have no resource to go to that will teach him how to handle his child.

What can be said about a society in which a single parent is raising a disabled child completely on their own, without the help or assistance of any peers, relatives or doctors? There is a severe lack of humanity in a society such as this. The reader sees how Christopher acts, and knows therefore what would upset him, but apparently the people surrounding him in his life do not have the same observations. This is one of the most important things about the novel, above any statement is trying to make about disability: people need to be educated about disability

before they can change how they react towards it. Christopher's father was obviously not given any resources to consult on how to raise an autistic child, and, as Christopher discovers later on in the novel, his mother is not dead, she simply left because his disability was too much to handle. These two parents had no prior knowledge as to how one should raise a child as unique as Christopher, or they simply did not care to look for any, and are now reaping what they've sown in the form of frustration.

After the violent encounter with his father, Christopher focuses on his book instead of Wellington's murder. While looking for the book his father took from him, he finds a box in his father's closet with an envelope. "It was an envelope addressed to me and it was lying under the book in the shirt box with some other envelopes. It had never been opened" (Haddon 118). This leads to the discovery of other envelopes, all addressed to him, and all dotted with a circle over the I's, which Christopher tells us is how his mother used to write her letters. The reader immediately suspects something is wrong with the situation, but, to Christopher, these letters are taken at extreme face value, and given no other thought other than to tuck them under his mattress for later.

The reader discovers that Christopher's mother, who Christopher had been told was dead by his father, is not, in fact, dead, but is living rather happily in London with Mr. Shears, the neighbor's former husband. This explains his father's hostility when the name is mentioned in the house, and also Mrs. Shears' hostility towards Christopher. Christopher does not realize, though, what his mother has done, and, not for the first time in the novel, the reader must watch as his entire belief system begins to unravel around him. It is a distressing passage to read, understandably, and when Christopher finally does realize what has happened, after reading four

or five of these letters, he breaks down in a way that the reader has not been privy to at this point in the novel.

Why did Christopher's father lie to him? Why did his mother leave in the first place? While we are only given these answers from Christopher's point of view and his mother's letters, it is pretty easy to ascertain one thing: the difficult nature of their child was one of the major factors in the break-down of Christopher's family structure. While she does not come right out and state it, through Christopher's mother's letters, the reader can see that this woman loves her son, she could not handle his 'disease'. She blames it on her hotheaded nature, and states that the family would be much healthier without her. As stated before, these two individuals obviously had no knowledge as to how one should raise an autistic child, and Christopher's trust is really better placed in people like Siobhan, who has an education behind her as to how to handle his disability. Disability education is something that all people should, at the very least, be aware of, because prejudice is something that truly does affect the well being of the general society.

When Christopher finally realizes what has happened, and that he has been lied to, it destroys him completely. He vomits, passes out, and then stays this way until the arrival of his father, who walks into his room to find the letters he had so carefully hidden from Christopher scattered on the floor.

> Then he said, 'I did it for your own good, Christopher. Honestly I did. I never meant to lie. I just thought…I just thought it was better if you didn't know…that…I didn't mean to…I was going to show them to you when you were older.'
>
> Then he was silent again.
>
> Then he said, 'It was an accident.'
>
> Then he was silent again.

> Then he said, 'I didn't know what to say…I was such a mess…She left a note and…Then she rang and…I said she was in hospital because…because I didn't know how to explain. It was so complicated. So difficult. And I…I said she was in hospital. And I know it wasn't true. But once I'd said that…I couldn't…I couldn't change it. Do you understand…Christopher…? Christopher…? It just…it got out of control and I wish…'
>
> Then he was silent for a really long time.

From this passage, it is obvious to the reader that Christopher's father had not told him about his mother leaving for mainly selfish reasons. But the worst thing about this revelation is not that Christopher's father lied, it was that he did not think his son could handle the truth. Yes, it would have been difficult. Yes, it would have taken time. But this passage makes Christopher's father Ed no better than the policeman who arrested Christopher earlier in the novel: he clearly does not understand who his son is and what his needs are.

After this episode, the rest of the novel seems to speed by fairly quickly. Christopher goes to London to find his mother and ends up returning to Swindon, his hometown, with her and gets to sit his A-level maths exam, which he passes. By the end of the novel, he has still not quite forgiven his father, and one wonders if he ever will.

Christopher's mother is another interesting character to observe during the story, because she is someone who, if it had not directly affected her, probably would have been closed-minded about disability. While she had the same experiences with Christopher as child as his father had, she cites her hot-temperedness as her reason for leaving the father and son alone to live their lives. "And I think that is when I realized you and your father were probably better off it I wasn't living in the house. Then he would only have one person to look after instead of two" (Haddon

136). Christopher's mother blames herself for not being able to deal with his disability, but she also states that if he had been different, she might have been a better mother.

While Christopher's father had the potential to be a good parent if he had simply been educated prior to having an autistic child, his mother seems to be the sort of person who picks up this novel and says something along the lines of 'I don't like this narrator because he's not like me'. She had the potential to truly love a child, but only on her own terms, it seems. The difficult nature of her son forced her to leave her marriage and her husband alone to raise their son, and seems to welcome Christopher back into her life more as a guest than as a son. She did leave London and move back to Swindon with him, but it seems to mainly be because she realized the man she was currently living with, the man she ran away from her husband and son with, was truly not a very decent person.

As might be made apparent, I have an inherent dislike towards the character of Christopher's mother in the novel. She states in her letters to him that she is sorry for the times they fought, and sorry for the times she hit him, making it apparent that, when they did live together, times were quite chaotic. The reader has to wonder, also, if she is so adamant about having her son in her life again not because she truly wishes to understand him, rather she possibly feels guilty for the way she treated him. When Christopher finds out he will not be able to take his maths exam for which he has been studying throughout the novel, rather than comforting him, his mom scolds him for being so upset. She clearly does not realize that this exam is something important to her son, and makes no efforts to solve the problem so that he will be able to take it.

His mother also seems to have no knowledge of what exactly will make her son happy, or feel comforted. After she finds out that her husband had lied to Christopher and told him that she

was dead all along, Judy, his mother, is quite distressed. She then asks her son, "Christopher, let me hold your hand. Just for once. Just for me. Will you? I won't hold it hard" (Haddon 237). As the reader has discovered by this point in the novel, Christopher does not like when people hold his hand, and has never done so with his father that we are able to see. His mother should have known this before asking, and, when Christopher denies her, Judy seems slightly put off. She clearly thinks that her son's autism is something that can be overcome, or that Christopher's refusal to hold her hand is pure selfishness on his part.

Haddon, by introducing this character, is showing that even people who are raising, or meant to be raising, a child with a disability are not perfect. Having a child with a disability, especially one like autism, has the potential to either make the parents learn all they can about the disorder to help their child, or to be completely selfish and focus more on their own wants and needs. While Ed, Christopher's father, is not perfect by any means, and could have dealt with things entirely differently, he was, above all, a good parent who cared for Christopher and would never intentionally hurt him. Judy, on the other hand, is exactly the sort of person who should not be raising an autistic child, or possibly even a child, at all.

Christopher's Dream

But, before we give up all hope entirely on Christopher finding happiness with his family, Haddon gives the reader what they might have been curious about all along: Christopher's dream. The reader is witness to Christopher's wants and desires on a very basic level, but, by the end of the book, one wonders, if the world were run by Christopher and people like him, how would it look? After falling asleep on a train, he has his favorite dream, one in which nearly everyone in the world gets a virus and dies. The interesting thing about this dream, though, is

that these people get the dream not from contact, or foods, but from looking in the faces of the infected, or interpreting the meaning on an infected person's face.

> And eventually there is no one left in the world except people who don't look at other people's faces and who don't know what these pictures mean and these people are all special people like me…
>
> And I can go anywhere in the world and I know what no one is going to talk to me or touch me or ask me a question. But if I don't want to go anywhere I don't have to…or I can just sit in the corner of the room and rub a pound coin backwards and forwards over the ripple shapes on the surface of the radiator. And I don't have to go to France.
>
> …And then I get some dry clothes from the house of a family who are dead. And I go home to Father's house, except it's not Father's house any more, it's mine. And I make myself some Gobi Allo Sag with red food coloring in and some strawberry milkshake for a drink, and then I watch a video about the Solar System and I play some computer games and I go to bed.
>
> And then the dream is finished and I am happy. (Haddon 244)

Throughout the novel, the reader has sometimes seen things that Christopher has "wanted", such as to ace his A-level maths or to want to become a scientist. But we have never really seen how Christopher would ideally have the world; we have only seen how he is forced to live in it. The life Christopher is living now, and the lives that many autistic people are living, are ones in which they might feel themselves confined, or restricted to a sect of society. And, to make things more difficult, Christopher is aware of the life he would like to be living, and how things could be better for him if he were able to think about things in his own way. The fact that he does not imagine a world in which he can simply be accepted is significant – he realizes that, if the

world is controlled by people who are 'normal', his way through live will never be easy. Christopher attends a school with children he deems as "dumb", which makes it clear that he does not think that he himself is dumb, he is simply not able to live in the way he needs to in order to be using his mind to its full potential.

Christopher also addresses the unique nature of his mind in a chapter concerning the way he thinks. Much like Temple Grandin, Christopher is aware of how he should be taught and educated: he just simply isn't able to learn in this way:

> And when I am in a new place, because I see everything, it is like when a computer is doing too many things at the same time, and the central processor unit is blocked up and there isn't any space left to think about other things. And when I am in a new place and there are lots of people there it is even harder because people are not like cows and flowers and grass and they can talk to you and do things that you don't expect, so you have to notice everything that is in the place, and also you have to notice things that might happen as well. And sometimes, when I am in a new place and there are lots of people there it is like a computer crashing and I have to close my eyes and put my hands over my ears and groan, which is like pressing **CRTL + ALT + DEL** and shutting down programs and turning the computer off and rebooting it so that I can remember what I am doing and where I am meant to be going.
>
> And that is why I am good at chess and maths and logic, because most people are almost blind and they don't see most things and there is lots of spare capacity in their heads and it is filled with things which aren't connected and are silly, like, "I'm worried that I might have left the gas cooker on." (Haddon 178)

Christopher is stating in this passage why exactly it is he thinks they way he does. He is obviously a visual learner, like many other autistic persons, The world has the potential to upset him, and sometimes it would be easier to live completely within himself, and not leave his room other than to go to school.

Here again, we have a case of Christopher's unique personality fighting with his disability and also with society's interpretation of that disability. Christopher is not the type to stay in his room all day, and even in his dream we see this, for when there are no people in the world, he still wants to get out and walk around the empty world. Christopher's disability does not define him for, as evidenced throughout the novel, he has many defining traits and qualities that prevent him from being another Lennie.

This is one of the points that Haddon really wishes the reader to walk away with: that no disabled person, regardless of how severe their situation, is simply a bundle of symptoms. The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time is one of the first cases in fiction where a disabled character has served as something other than a plot device or pity inducer, and that is because of how well Christopher has been crafted as a character, given traits, likes and dislikes, that pull him away from any stock character definition.

Christopher is a way to show the reader what can and should be done to help those with and without disabilities deal with the prejudice that faces them. He is not just a cardboard framework of how a non-disabled person views disability, he *is* disabled, and is a realistic interpretation of disability, at that.

In the book Handicapping America: Barriers to Disabled People, Frank Bowe discusses the disabled and the barriers that are placed in front of them on a regular basis: "For America need not be handicapping, nor need it be handicapped. Because each of us is part of the problem,

each of us can become part of the solution. People have erected these barriers, and people can eliminate them" (Bowe xiii). And Bowe is absolutely right: we, or general society, have the prejudices against the people that we do not because they were forced upon us, but because something at some point in our lives triggered the reaction to judge a certain group of people without getting to know them. And nowhere is this more prevalent than in works of literature. Would Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* have been as successful as it was had Shylock been written as anything other than a miserly, penny-pinching Jew? Certainly not. Would The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn have sold as many copied as it did had Jim been an educated, well-spoken African-American? Probably not. And, finally, who would have taught grumpy old Scrooge the message of caring about the world had Tiny Tim not been crippled and fatally ill?

These kinds of characters might have been needed at a certain time in our society, when people were still getting used to the ideas of women in fiction, perhaps, or the idea of a black person narrating a novel. But most of these individual prejudices within fiction have disappeared, or at least they have decreased significantly, and when people read they do not give the race or gender of a protagonist a second thought. For some reason, disability has not moved on to this level yet, but with Mark Haddon penning books for the general public, perhaps it will eventually.

Conclusion

Working towards tearing down these walls of prejudice, Haddon has written a novel featuring a lead character who is disabled, but not defined by it, and who is an actual realistic representation of autism, rather than a watered-down version of the symptoms thrown together. By the end of the novel, the readers find that they care about Christopher immensely, and also about his well being, worrying about what will happen to him after the book is over.

Haddon leaves readers with a rather unresolved ending, Earlier, I quoted McInerney who argues that this just serves to further the gap between the reader and Christopher. This opinion is certainly valid, but is it the correct one? Throughout the novel, the reader is shown sides of Christopher and parts of him that nobody else in his life can see. We are witness to how his brain reacts when someone touches him. We observe his breakdown when his entire world comes crashing down. We laugh with him, we get angry with him and we sometimes might even cry with him, because, by the end of the book, he really is a part of 'us'. The reader has learned to accept that Christopher is both different from his or her ideas of normalcy, and he is also surprisingly the same. One anonymous Amazon reader noted that, after reading the book, he found himself talking like Christopher for days, making the same sorts of observations and judgments that he does, and finding the humor in things such as metaphors and jokes that are truly not very funny.

And isn't this the point of the book all along? Isn't this the point that any writer wants to make? Writers want us, the readers, to be able to associate with a character, to the extent that we feel for the narrator, much the same as we feel for any friend or relative. Haddon uses his words extremely well, and, by the end of the book, the reader feels empathy for this boy who they have seen through thick and thin, and really hopes for him only the best. If Christopher's final words are to be trusted, this will certainly come to pass. By stating the he "can do anything", Christopher is not saying that he can literally do *anything*, rather that he can do the things he chooses and restrained in any way by his disability. And, if the readers have learned anything about Christopher throughout the novel, they will be supporting him every step of the way.

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